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ABSTRACT

The book explains for the general reader the history and present practice of curanderismo--Mexican American folk healing practices--and gives biographical sketches of three famous nineteenth century folk healers--Don Pedrito Jaramillo, Nino Fidencio, and Teresita Urrea. Characteristics and training of curanderos, or healers, are discussed and the specialties within curanderismo are explained. Eleven common ailments and symptoms treated by curanderos, rituals used, and folk beliefs dealing with everyday occurrences are described. Sketches of the three folk healers illustrate biographical chapters which recount legends and current practices of their followers as well as biographical information. Modern curanderos are described and their place in the Mexican American community explored. An annotated bibliography listing 10 books about curanderos is included. (LFL)

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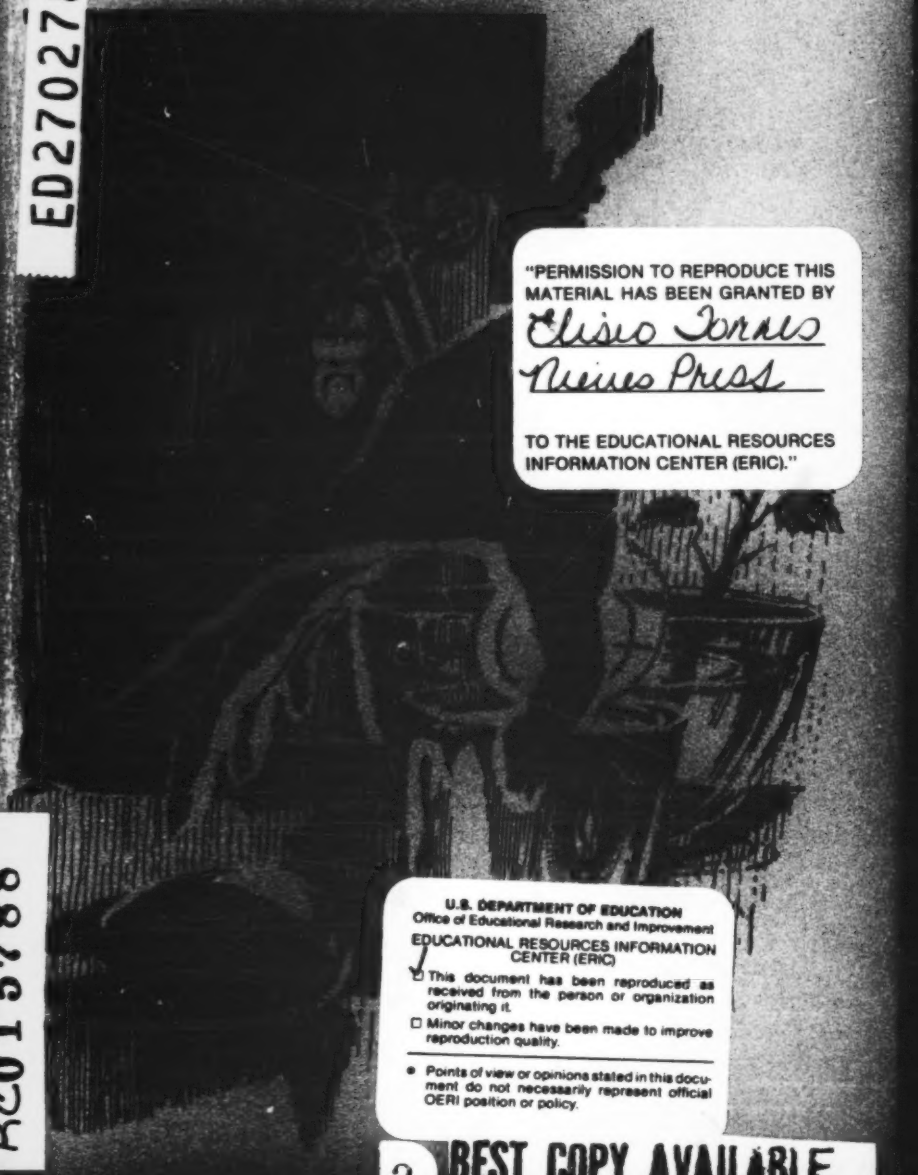
Eliseo Torres

THE FOLK HEALER

The Mexican-American Tradition of Curanderismo



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THE FOLK HEALER

The Mexican-American Tradition of Curanderismo

by Eliseo Torres

1984

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Foreword

Even as a child growing up in a small South Texas community, I was fascinated by the practice of *curanderismo* or folk healing. I vividly remember the ritual to cure *mal de ojo* – the evil eye – with its prayers and the use of the egg. There were days that I would have a mild *cólico* and would get the treatment for that. Also, there were many times that I would experience a bad fright and suffer from *susto* and have to be cleansed with a broom or *ruda*. Still, though I grew up with it, it is difficult to explain, not so much the rituals of curanderismo, but the love and the faith associated with it.

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Nonetheless, I wanted to try. I felt it was very important to keep curanderismo alive, and also to acquaint the general public with its importance in the Mexican and Mexican-American culture. I began to do this while I was still a doctoral student at Texas A&I University in Kingsville.

At first I concentrated on the herbs. It was natural to begin here, remembering as I did that for every illness and with every ritual there would always be a freshly brewed cup of tea: perhaps *manzanilla* or *yerba buena* or *anís*. During visits to relatives or friends, cuttings of different varieties of plants that were used to make the teas were always given to my mother, who quickly got them into the earth once we got home!

With this in mind, I developed a teaching unit on Folk Medicine and Medicinal Herbs of South Texas and Northern Mexico. I interviewed several *curanderos* – folk healers – and *yerberos* – herbalists – in Mexican towns and in towns in the Rio Grande Valley and along the border in the United States. After that, I gave many lectures, in person and on television, about the subject.

It became clear that interest in curanderismo was high, and yet available works on the subject – particularly works aimed at the average person rather than the sociologist or scholar – were few and far between. I felt I had to expand my lecture notes into something more substantial to fill this need.

So it was that my first book, *Green Medicine: Traditional Mexican-American Herbal Remedies*, came into being. From there, it seemed only natural to go on to describe the practices surrounding the use of those herbs – the same rituals that I recall from my childhood. Thus I was led to prepare this companion volume, *The Folk Healer*.

I hope you will enjoy it.

Elisa Tamez

A Brief History

The term *curanderismo* may be translated 'folk healing'. A curandero or curandera, then, is a healer, with the letter at the end of the word signifying whether male or female. All three words derive from the Spanish verb *curar*, which means to heal.

The roots of curanderismo are many. The Moors, for instance, brought in Arabic elements, which came to the New World via Spain. The theory of "the humors", with its emphasis on balance between light and darkness, heat and cold, was introduced this way. Some beliefs associated with curanderismo, particularly the insistence that all power to heal comes from God, are Biblical and therefore Judeo-Christian in origin. And, of course, there are powerful Indian – particularly Aztec – influences, too, most often in the herbal remedies that are used.

Curanderismo has always embraced three levels, though certain curanderos may choose to emphasize one above or even to the exclusion of the others. These are the material (the most common, with its emphasis on objects such as candles, oils, herbs), the spiritual (here the curandero is often a medium), and the mental (psychic healers, for example). Rituals – formulaic or patterned ways of treating the various illnesses of those who come to see the curandero – are present on all three levels.

One needn't be familiar with curanderismo nor believe in it in order for it to work. Evelyne Winter, in her *Mexico's Ancient and Native Remedies*, collected this story from a woman named Muriel Balfour. Mrs. Balfour's husband had obviously been treated by a curandero, but – just as obvious – the Balfours had no idea that this was so, nor that the treatment given was pretty much "standard operating procedure" in curanderismo. The point is, though the Balfour's were

not predisposed to believe, the cure worked! Here's Mrs. Balfour's account:

"My late husband one time had a very bad eye and headache. A man came to see him to cure him. This 'doctor' asked me for a raw egg which I gave him. While the egg was still in its shell he passed it many times over my husband's head and face. Then he asked me for a dish and he opened the egg which had become hard boiled. We asked if it had cured him and he said not entirely. The 'doctor' came the next day and went through the same procedure with a fresh egg but after the treatment the egg was not hard boiled, only coddled. The 'doctor' was not satisfied that the cure had been completed and came the third day. The egg the third day was unchanged by the treatment and the man pronounced him cured. And my husband *was* cured."

The use of the egg is quite common in curanderismo, perhaps because, as scholars Robert T. Trotter II and Juan Antonio Chavira note in their book, *Curanderismo*, "The material properties of the egg include its ordinary use as food; its mystical properties, however, include its ability to absorb negative influences (sickness) from a patient. Still another reason is that many rituals demand a sacrificial object, and, again noting Trotter and Chavira, "the egg qualifies as an animal cell."

In addition to the egg, the lemon figures in the rituals of curanderismo, as does *agua preparada* – specially prepared water. Water, especially water that has been blessed (holy water), is considered a physical link with the spiritual world. In fact, it is not uncommon for a curandero to dip the other objects he is using into holy water to enhance their curative powers.

Fire, too, in the form of candles and incense, plays a part in many of the ceremonies, as do many herbs (see my *Green Medicine*) and aromatic oils.

But, as with lemon and the egg, curanderismo also relies on items which are very ordinary indeed. Purple onion, for instance, and garlic are often used. These items are said to protect one, while the aforementioned egg and lemon are thought to actually absorb negative forces.

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The Curandero

It is the state of consciousness that distinguishes the curandero working on the material level: He is awake rather than in a trance and is himself – that is, has not assumed the being of another.

Curanderos also have specialties. A *yerbero* will be an herbalist, able to prescribe botanical remedies. A *partera* is a midwife. A *sobador* or *sobadora* will be a masseuse or masseur. That the three levels touch and cross each other can easily be seen when we use the *sobador* as an example.

A *sobador* might well work only on the material level, using his hands and perhaps an aromatic oil or a poultice or even a tea. But a *sobador* might also heal even an ill that exists deep beneath the surface of the skin – indeed, perhaps in the nervous system or in the mind. That *sobador* might be said to operate on the psychic level as well. There are *sobadores*, for instance, who have been said to cure paralysis.

A *señora*, however, because she reads cards in order to foretell the future or reveal the influence of the past, can be said to emphasize the mental or psychic level. An *espiritista* or medium would work entirely on the spiritual level.

While it is true that most curanderos work on the material level, the spiritual mode is growing in popularity. This is particularly due to the *Fidencistas*, followers of Niño Fidencio, a Mexican healer. These followers are said to assume Niño's spirit now that he is dead, – that is, *become* him, in order to heal.

Is belief in curanderismo a religious belief, or is it a belief in the supernatural? Well, it is often both. The aforementioned belief that all healing power comes from God makes it religious, as does the very prevalent idea

that a curandero can only bring about God's will. The belief that certain rituals or practices can effect a certain outcome is, however, a belief in the supernatural – that is, a belief that outside forces can be changed, controlled. In this way, curanderismo partakes of both the religious and the supernatural. In fact, a curandero can be a *brujo* – a witch – capable of casting evil spells! Curanderismo, therefore, is careful to distinguish between white magic and black magic, with most curanderos espousing the former.

How does one become a curandero? Often – as you will see when you read the stories of the most famous healers – it is a matter of recognizing that one has the God-given gift – the *don*, as it is called. Sometimes, too, it is the result of a long apprenticeship. Many curanderos renounce steady jobs in order to work as healers.

In defining who is and who isn't a curandero, the amount of time one spends healing is usually considered. While most cities and barrios within cities have someone whom they call upon to prescribe teas and other herbal remedies for minor ills, the curandero is one to whom one brings more serious cases. The curandero does not have another job; healing is the basis of the curandero's livelihood.

In the past, another consideration when measuring the authenticity of a given person's claim to being a curandero was whether or not that person charged for his services. The true curandero was said to take what had been offered, and there are many recorded instances, too, of curanderos refusing to accept even small payments when these were offered by the very poor.

Now that is no longer the case. When KPRC-TV in Houston did a mini-documentary on two modern curanderos, for instance, they found that the youngest, a woman named María, not only charged for her services, but had an hourly rate. "I charge ten dollars for one hour," María boasted. "What I really should be charging

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is a hundred and fifty dollars an hour ... 'cause I'm damn good!" María, however, is still the exception.

In many cases, the fact that money is not needed is one reason curanderismo still thrives in Mexican and Mexican-American neighborhoods. Still others are that there is no language barrier, no need for an appointment, and, frequently, no necessity to travel great distances. Also, a curandero does not require that his patients have medical insurance nor that they fill out complicated forms.

Equally important is the fact that the curandero treats many ailments not even recognized as such by the formal medical establishment. In many cases, these ailments reflect the patient's psychological state. As Ari Kiev, an author and psychiatrist, has pointed out, curanderismo is a system of medicine which recognizes the profound effect the emotions can have on health. It takes into account the physical manifestations of such feelings as anger, sorrow, shame, rejection, fear, desire, and disillusionment. When one considers that the holistic movement is one arm of formal medicine which has finally begun to recognize this, the centuries-old practice of curanderismo seems advanced indeed.

What is formal medicine's attitude toward curanderismo? Well, as you might guess, curanderismo was long regarded as superstition or medicine which, at best, treated only imagined ills. Now, however, the medical establishment has become more tolerant. Again, the holistic movement has done much to promote – for the most part, inadvertently – acceptance of this ancient system. In any case, a lot of writing about curanderismo is addressed to health care professionals and urges them to think of curanderismo as either an alternative or a supplement to formal medicine.

Ailments

The most common ailments treated by curanderismo are *mal de ojo*, sometimes referred to as *mal ojo*, or just plain *ojo*, *susto*, *caída de mollera*, and *empacho*.

There are also a number of ailments less frequently encountered, and these would be found in Mexico more often than in the United States. These are *mal aire*, sometimes just called *aire*, *desasombro*, *espanto*, *bilis*, *muina*, and *latido*.

Then, too, there are ills brought about by evil or witchcraft. These are *envidia*, *mal puesto*, *salar*, and *maleficio*.

A curandero might be called upon to treat any of these. On the other hand, in mild cases, a member of the family might administer an herbal remedy. If a family member tried to remedy the ill, however, and it persisted, it is likely that a curandero would be consulted.

Definitions of the various ailments and their causes differ, but those which follow are generally accepted:

Mal de ojo

Although this sounds as though it is inflicted through malice, the opposite is the case. *Mal de ojo* – the evil eye – comes about through excessive admiration, usually of those too weak to absorb it. Babies are the most frequent victims, but animals can contract *ojo*, too. Charms are worn by those susceptible to evil eye. The most common is the *ojo de venado* or deer's eye.

Why would admiration cause illness? Some scholars say that it arises from the belief that a person projects something of himself when he admires another. If

the person receiving the admiration can't handle it, either because of youth or weakness, illness results.

To counteract the effect of the admiration and guard against *mal de ojo*, the admirer must touch the person, animal, or object of his admiration.

The symptoms of *ojo* are similar to those of colic: irritability, drooping eyes, fever, headache, and vomiting.

Susto

Sometimes *susto* is translated as loss of spirit or even loss of soul. Occasionally, it is translated as shock, though it shouldn't be confused with the life-threatening medical condition known as shock. A common definition is fright.

Receiving bad news can cause *susto*, as can any bad scare. It is thought that such a scare can temporarily drive the person's spirit or soul from the body. Susto has to be treated immediately or it will lead to a much more serious version, called *susto pasado* or, in Mexico, *susto meco* – an old *susto* which is much more difficult to treat and which can lead to death.

Weakness is a symptom of *susto*. Or, as Dolores Latorre describes it in her *Cooking and Curing With Mexican Herbs*, "the victim suddenly feels wobbly, chilly, shaky, limp, and drowsy, or he may develop a headache accompanied by nausea." On the other hand, when Ari Kiev describes the symptoms in his *Curanderismo*, he writes that they are "a mixture of anxiety – dyspnea, indigestion, palpitations, and depression – loss of interest in things, irritability, insomnia, and anorexia." Kiev relates one curandero's belief that a *susto* untreated can lead to heart attack.

Caída de mollera

This condition – in English known as "fallen fontanelle" – afflicts only babies. The symptoms are irritability, diarrhea, and vomiting. The baby thus becomes dehydrated and exhibits the most prominent symptom, the one that gives the condition its name: a depressed fontanelle (soft spot).

Caída de mollera is thought to be caused by rough handling or from pulling the baby's bottle or the mother's breast from his mouth while he is sucking it. It can also, however, be caused by a fall from the bed or crib. Or the baby can cause it himself by sucking too greedily.

Empacho

The main symptom of this ill is diarrhea and a feeling of weight in the pit of one's stomach. Loss of appetite (not surprisingly) follows.

The symptoms of *empacho* are thought to be produced by something actually stuck in the stomach or blocking the intestines. It can afflict adults, but children are the usual victims.

Empacho is an ailment that reflects the need for balance that is expressed in the theory of the humors – that is, it is thought to be caused by improperly mixing hot with cold foods, or eating such foods in improper sequence. Eating too quickly and thus not chewing food completely is another act thought to cause *empacho*.

Ari Kiev points out – as an interesting sidenote – that both *empacho* and *caída de mollera* "are associated with the proper management of children" and are therefore ailments whose presence arouses feelings of guilt in the parents.

Mal aire

This seems similar to an upper respiratory infection, in that it produces earache, stiff neck, chills, dizziness, and headache. What is often called "a cold" can be referred to as *aire*.

Desasombro

Desasombro is thought to be a more serious form of *susto*, though it is not to be confused with *susto pasado* or *susto meco*, which are more serious because they've been permitted to persist. Nor is *desasombro* as serious as *espanto*, which will be discussed next. *Desasombro* should be thought of as a *susto* with a more significant cause. If stepping on a snake resulted in a *susto*, stepping on a poisonous snake would result in *desasombro*.

Espanto

This, like *susto*, is a form of spirit loss, but it is much more severe. The difference between the two, as delineated by Dolores Latorre, will explain why this is so. Latorre writes that "*susto* takes place when the victim is in possession of his spirit, and, although the spirit may temporarily leave the body due to the fright, the spirit is believed to be nearby and can easily be persuaded to return to the body through the prescribed ritual. *espanto*, on the other hand, occurs when a person is asleep. Since at this time, the spirit may leave the body to wander far and wide during dreams, it may not be nearby to return into the body when entreated."

She goes on to outline the causes of *espanto*. These include being awakened suddenly by something frightening – say, a burglar or a disaster such as a fire or flood, by a fall from bed, or by a nightmare.

Bilis

This is best described as having excessive bile in the system. It is thought to be brought about by suppressed anger. Symptoms include gas, constipation, a pasty-looking tongue and sour taste in the mouth.

Muína

This, Dolores Latorre reports, is sometimes called "anger sickness", but it differs from *bilis* in that itresults from a show of rage rather than its suppression. The victim, Latorre writes, "becomes tied up in knots, trembles, and may lose the ability to talk or may become momentarily paralyzed. The jaws may lock, or hearing may stop." Like *bilis*, *muína* can result in a discharge of bile throughout the body. Latorre says that it can lead to jaundice.

Latido

Originally, the symptoms of *latido*, which translates as 'palpitation' or 'throb,' were a feeling of weakness, and a throbbing, jumpy feeling in the pit of the stomach. Now, however, the term *latido* is often used to describe a stomach ache. Both forms of *latido* tend to strike those who are weak and thin.

Some liken *latido* to a nervous stomach, though others, probably describing the original ailment, say it is like the condition which medical authorities call hypoglycemia. Indeed, symptoms of *latido* usually occur when a person has not eaten for a long period of time.

Envidia, mal puesto, salar, maleficio

These are all the result of evil-doing, and most are motivated by envy (or, less often, revenge). The threat of these ills is often enough to make a person live modestly,

never making an obvious show of anything that might inspire the jealousy of another.

Some of these conditions can be brought about by an individual, but often the individual will engage the services of a witch, or *brujo*, sometimes called a black curandero. Most curanderos, however, are white curanderos — not those who cause illness, but rather those who heal in the name of God.

A curandero who is not a witch, fortunately, can remove a hex or spell. Or, as happens less frequently, a black curandero can be hired to counter it with a spell of his own. Indeed, sometimes feuds or battles between black curanderos have been recorded. Patrick Boulay, writing in the *San Antonio Light*, noted, for example, "Of nine curanderos The Light attempted to track down, three had died and one contracted a serious illness at the time the last battle was said to have occurred." One of the people Boulay interviewed for the article said that feuds between black curanderos "have taken a tremendous toll in San Antonio."

More often, a curandero who is not a witch (and most aren't) will be called upon to cure an ailment brought about by witchcraft. This is true even of the most famed curanderos.

In one story, a woman reported witnessing the seizure of still another woman who was *embrujada* — bewitched. The seizure took place in the presence of the famous Don Pedrito Jaramillo of Falfurrias, Texas. Don Pedrito, according to the account in Ruth Dodson's *The Healer of Los Olmos*, attempted, without success, to revive the woman, who had lost consciousness. The woman is said to have awakened, but during another seizure, long after leaving Don Pedrito's, she is rumored to have fallen into an open fire where she burned to death.

More successfully, the famous curandero of Espinazo, Mexico, Niño Fidencio, is said to have left posterity

a formula against being hexed. It requires, according to Dolores Latorre, that an Aloe Vera plant be tied with a red ribbon knotted twelve times and that a lime be attached to the plant with yet another red ribbon. Both should be looped around the Aloe Vera's roots and then the plant should be suspended, upside down, above the inside of the front door. But this was not enough! Each Friday before sunrise, the plant had to be taken outdoors and placed in water until just before noon. When the plant was brought inside again, the water in which it had soaked was to be sprinkled around the house. Whether this is an effective preventative or simply something to take one's mind off witchcraft and hexing is not known! These stories do demonstrate, however, that even the most famous of curanderos have had to deal with *brujos* and their work!

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The Rituals

While many of these ailments require that the patient eat, drink, or otherwise use a specific substance – an herb, say – their cure also involves ritual and the use of what an anthropologist would call "symbolic objects." To define the latter, think of the stereotypical view of the jungle "witch doctor" as presented in movies or even comic books: in all likelihood, he wears a mask and carries bones or a rattle. Well, the mask, the bones, and the rattle are clearly "symbolic objects." They are supposed to have a certain power in whatever ceremony the "witch doctor" performs.

A curandero uses symbolic objects, too, but because he feels his power comes from God, the symbols are those which are shared by many religious people who are not healers: the cross, pictures of saints, votive candles and the like.

The curandero also uses everyday materials: olive oil, water, or, most commonly an egg. The modern curandera, María, who was interviewed on television, said that she uses growing plants. "These plants . . . are very sensitive to their surroundings," María said. "When I tell a person that I am going to work on a particular problem for them . . . if they have an illness of some sort, then what I do is I tell them to buy me a plant. When they buy me a plant, they have automatically put their own vibrations . . . their own thoughts, feelings . . . negative and positive . . . into the plant. The reason a plant works is that, once a ritual has been performed, where the plant takes on the identity of that person, a spiritual link is formed between that plant and that person. No other person can take on the identity of the plant and vice versa."

Don Pedrito often used mere water, instructing patients to drink, for example, a glass at bedtime each night for a certain number of nights.

But the egg figures in most rituals of curanderismo, past and present. Earl Thompson, a novelist of astonishing talent, described one such ritual in his *Caldo Largo*:

"(The curandera) straightened Lupe's body so she lay face up like a corpse, even crossing her hands on her breasts. As she crossed her hands, she slipped something into Lupe's palms, closed her hands into fists, and told her to hold what she had put in them very tight.

'What is it?' Lupe asked.

'Herbs. Now don't talk again until I tell you.'

The curandera placed candles on the table at Lupe's head and feet. She then poured some fragrant oil from a bottle that had once held tequila into her own large hands, warmed it between her palms and began to work it back through Lupe's hair until her thick reddish tresses were fanned around her face and down over her breasts and body until Lupe gleamed with the oil, all the while chanting some sort of prayer which I could not understand except for the occasional mention of the mother of Jesus. It was in a dialect I had never heard before. It was hypnotic. I thought Lupe had gone to sleep or fallen into a trance. She seemed hardly to breathe. The smell of the oil was that of jasmine mixed with fresh herbs. The room was very warm and close . . .

She massaged Lupe front and back and front again, chanting all the while. The last time she had Lupe hold the egg in her clasped hands on her breast.

Then she took the egg from her and began gently rubbing it over her, forehead, face, neck, and shoulders and then over the rest of her body. She traced the perimeters of Lupe with the egg as if drawing a pattern of her . . .

She then described a cross on her with the egg . . .

she brought the egg to rest finally on Lupe's navel."

Compare the ritual undergone by Lupe to those described by Trotter and Chavira in their book on curanderismo, written to provide health care professionals with a better understanding of the subject. While rituals vary in detail from healer to healer, they have a certain common theme.

Mal ojo, the two say, "is treated by having the child lie down and sweeping him three times with an egg. The sweeping is done by forming crosses with the egg, on the child's body, starting at the head and going to the feet. While sweeping, the healer recites the Apostles' Creed three times, making sure that he sweeps both the front and the back. The egg is cracked and dropped into a glass or jar filled with water. The jar may then be placed on the child's head, and another Creed recited. The jar is then placed under the child's bed, usually under the place where the child rests his head. The next morning at sunrise the egg may either be burned or cast away in the form of a cross."

In a book intended for school children entitled *Discovering Folklore Through Community Resources*, the ritual described to cure *ojo* is very similar, though less solemn, in that, in the morning, the egg, it is said, can either be buried or flushed down the toilet. The egg, once it is broken into the water, too, is used for diagnosis: "If the white becomes solid and forms an oval (an eye-shaped ring), people believe that the patient has indeed been suffering from a case of *ojo* and that he has been cured."

A curandero whom Ari Kiev interviewed said: "You have to break an egg and say a prayer. You break your egg, put it in the glass, and then put some little piece from the broom, you know, on top like a cross, and then the egg starts bubbling. You have to brush (the victim) with the egg first – make like a cross. The egg takes out the evil from the child and makes the person causing it stop ... When the egg starts boiling, that is when

you know he had *ojo*. When the egg goes down, if it does not boil, it means that he doesn't have the *ojo*."

Remember the woman whom Evelyne Winter interviewed? When her husband was first rubbed with the egg, it was hard-boiled afterwards, then coddled, and finally raw. It was only when the egg emerged raw that the curandero considered the man cured.

The ritual for curing *susto* involves a broom. As Trotter and Chavira describe it: "The sick person lies down and is completely covered with a sheet. The healer sweeps the patient with the broom, saying the Apostle's Creed three times. At the end of each Creed, the healer whispers in the patient's ear, 'Come, don't stay there'. The patient responds, 'I am coming'. The sick person must perspire and is then given some tea of *yerba anís* to drink. The healer then places a cross of holy palm on the patient's head and asks Almighty God, in the name of the Holy Trinity, to restore the patient's spiritual strength."

The cure for *susto* which Dolores Latorre describes involves both the broom and the egg: "The cure must be done on three consecutive nights: Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, the last day being the most effective. The patient lies on the bed with arms extended in the form of a cross while his entire body is cleansed with alum or a whole egg and he is swept with a bundle or broom of herbs, preferably horehound, rosemary, California pepertree, redbrush, or naked-seed weed, tied together or separately. Each evening, fresh herbs are used."

Both rituals involve an invocation to the patient's spirit to return, and the patient's reply. In Trotter and Chavira, the appropriate response is said to be '*Aquí vengo*,' while Latorre reports that '*Hay voy*' is used. Both may be interpreted as an affirmative response suggesting that the spirit is indeed returning.

Discovering Folklore Through Community Resources reports, as did Latorre, that the cure takes place

over a Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, but shows a curandera first blessing the *susto* victim's bed with a knife. The healer then sweeps the patient with *Cenizo* and blesses him with holy water. The Apostles Creed is used in this ritual as well, but in addition to it, the curandera recites from her own personal prayerbook. Only then does she call the spirit, enjoining it to return. After the ritual, the herbs used to sweep the patient are taken home to be placed under the patient's pillow in the form of a cross.

Ari Kiev describes sweeping, too, but the curanderos he interviewed suggested that *Granada* leaves be used. One of Kiev's healer informants reported that occasionally, massage with an egg was also used for *susto*.

Don Pedrito, whose cures were often offbeat, is said to have cured a *susto* by divining what had caused it (the victim had witnessed a murder) and prescribing that a draught of beer be drunk on three successive nights. Still another legend about Don Pedrito is that he once cured one *susto* by subjecting the victim to another, in fact, appearing to the victim in the guise of a bandit to provide the scare! Both of these stories were gathered by Ruth Dodson in her *The Healer of Los Olmos*.

The treatment for *caída de mollera* is more standard. As Kiev reports, "It involves turning the baby over on his heels, pushing up against the roof of the child's mouth, packing the fontanelle area with moist salt, and/or binding the area."

By "binding" the area, smearing it with a sticky substance – either soap or egg-white – is meant. It is not uncommon to see babies who have had this area so treated out in public.

The thumb is usually used against the roof of the baby's mouth.

An egg can be used to pinpoint the site of the block-

age causing *empacho*. A Mexican-American mother whom Kiev interviewed, for instance, told of her method of diagnosis: "To treat it, you rub their stomach real good and rub them with an egg at room temperature, not from the fridge, and then you rub their stomach real good with it. Wherever that egg burst, that is where the *empacho* is in the stomach."

More often, a massage, followed by the administration of a laxative, is used. The same woman concludes the description of treatment thusly: "Then they tie a piece of linen around to hold it there. After they do all the rubbing and applying of the egg, they give them a good dose of castor oil or something to make them move their bowels."

Trotter and Chavira found this combination: "In some cases the healer massages that part of the back behind the stomach with warm olive oil and pulls on the skin. The skin is said to make a snapping noise when the trapped food particles are loosened. In either case, a tea is given to treat the damaged stomach."

One home remedy is to rub the patient's stomach with shortening and — again, this conveys the notion of loosening something that is stuck — pulling the skin on the patient's back until it pops.

Mal aire is treated like a cold — with tea, lemon juice, even whiskey. Liniments and poultices are used, too.

The treatment for *aesasombro* is much more elaborate, for it is a much more serious ill. One popular method of cure is outlined in *Discovering Folklore Through Community Resources*. The treatment is to be done outdoors at eleven in the morning. It begins when the curandero digs four holes in the ground in the shape of a diamond. One hole is for the head, one for the feet, and two are for the hands. The area is covered with a white sheet, and the patient stretches out, face down, in the form of a cross atop it, with his limbs in the

appropriate spots. Another white sheet is placed atop him. The curandero, reciting the Apostle's Creed, then sweeps the patient from top to bottom.

It is interesting to note that in various recorded remedies for *susto*, curanderos have been quite specific about what should be used for the sweeping. In one case it was *Granada* and in another *Cenizo*, for instance. The ritual outlined above says that an ordinary household broom can be used.

This is just to illustrate how these rituals are adapted according to what is available.

In any case, the curandero sweeps the patient and recites the Apostle's Creed three times as he does so. Now the patient rolls over, face up, hands still outstretched in the form of a cross. The sweeping ritual is repeated.

Now the patient is uncovered and stands. The curandero strikes the patient's shadow. Then the curandero drags a piece of clothing which the patient has worn into the patient's house, calling the spirit as he does so. He continues to call until he reaches the patient's bed. The patient comes in, sits on the bed, and drinks a cup of *anís* tea. The patient finishes drinking, leaving a bit of the tea in the cup.

Next the curandero takes some of the dirt that was removed from the four holes he dug when the ritual began. This dirt is mixed with the tea that the patient left. With the resulting mud, the curandero marks the sign of the cross on each of the patient's joints.

The patient then gets under as many covers as it will take to make him sweat. The curandero sweeps the patient now with *Cenizo* and completes the ritual by reciting the Apostle's Creed three more times.

Treatment for *bilis* is far less exotic. Epsom salts or some other laxative would be given once each week for

three weeks. On the other hand, the treatment for *muina* – the other illness caused by anger – is very formulaic. As Dolores Latorre reports: "The affected person is swept with three red flowers on three consecutive days, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, and afterward is given a decoction made with flowers and leaves of the orange tree or other citrus. This will calm the patient. If it does not, the person is struck, shaken, or addressed with unkind words in order to break the fit of anger." Interestingly, the symptoms which Latorre attributes to *muina* (given earlier in this book) are much like those of someone we would call hysterical. For a long time, and even today, an hysterical person is slapped or shaken, much the way the victim of *muina* would be if he didn't respond to the ritual of the flowers.

Latido is usually treated by administering nourishment. Some suggest that a patient take, for nine consecutive days, a mixture of raw egg, salt, pepper, and lemon juice. A more appetizing cure requires that the patient eat bean soup with onion, coriander, and garlic. Latorre describes a *comfortativo* made of a hard roll which is split, sprinkled with alcohol, filled with peppermint leaves, nasturtiums, some cinnamon, cloves and onions. After this is done, the roll is closed, wrapped in white cloth, and bandaged over the pit of the patient's stomach.

The fact is, as far fetched as some of these rituals may sound to those of us accustomed to the cold, sterile administration of medical aid, they work! And as the story from Evelyne Winter's book, related earlier, demonstrates, one does not have to believe in the cures in order for them to work.

Perhaps most importantly, the curandero focusses his attention one hundred percent on his patient. This cannot but be an important component of the healing process.

Then, too, touch figures largely in the healing rituals. Only recently has the medical establishment come to admit the therapeutic importance of touch.

The rituals often involve other members of the patient's family, too, and many are done in the patient's own home. The person who is ill thus has a very deep sense of belonging while the rituals are performed.

The status of the curandero also figures in his success. As Ari Kiev points out: "The curandero is never in doubt as to the diagnosis or treatment and does not undermine confidence in himself among nontechnically oriented patients by ordering laboratory tests and X-rays. He turns to meaningful sources of strength such as the saints and God."

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Folk Beliefs

There are numerous beliefs associated with curanderismo that do not necessarily have to do with illness. Many of these involve the color red. A red thread laid across the forehead of a person with hiccups is said to cure them. A red ribbon, tied in knots to represent the problems of the person, when buried, is said to rid that person of the problems the knots represent. A red dress, worn by a mother, is rumored to cure an apathetic or listless child.

Red is considered the color of love, and it figures in love-related ceremonies. A San Antonio curandera melted two red candles together, molding them by hand into something resembling human form, in order to reunite a separated couple. In the same ritual, water tinted red was also used.

There are many beliefs involving preventatives. The *ojo de venado* or deer's eye charm which keeps its wearer safe from *mal de ojo* is one such. A bag of parsley worn about the neck is said to ward off snakes. A pregnant woman is advised to hang some keys around her waist during a lunar eclipse to keep her baby from being deformed by the moon's shadow.

Beliefs about the moon itself are interesting. It is thought, for instance, that a person can become bewitched by the moon – *alunado*.

Simply carrying a bud of garlic is supposed to ward away a host of potential ills.

A *barrida* or spiritual cleansing is a preventative ritual performed by a curandero. It serves to eliminate negative influences by transferring them to another object. Trotter and Chavira describe the ceremony:

"Patients are swept from their head to their feet,

with the curandero making sweeping or brushing motions with an egg, a lemon, an herb, or whatever appropriate object is deemed necessary. According to some informants the object must be held in the curandero's left hand and must touch the person being swept ... Standard prayers used in this ritual include the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed ...."

An article in the *San Antonio Light* mentioned several preventatives – mainly amulets or, in Spanish, *amuletos*: "Many are made of what looks like dirt, glitter, gold colored corn, a broken cross-shaped twig painted silver with metal shavings packaged in a cellophane bag.

Candles are also a common item. They come in various colors, each denoting a particular meaning.

Burning a black candle brings freedom from evil, a blue candle brings peace, harmony and joy, and a red candle denotes love and affection.

An old wive's tale reminds pregnant women to burn pink colored incense and look at a colored picture of St. Ramón. This is supposed to be good for the mother and her unborn child.

Another long-time practice is the idea of putting a coin in the mouth of the image of St. Ramón so bad things won't be said about you."

Proponents of curanderismo have enormously strong beliefs in luck and do what they can to court it. Various types of incense are used for this purpose. Not only was incense used in Aztec and Mayan ceremonies, but it figured largely in the Judeo-Christian past as well. The three wise men or Magi, for example, were said to bring the Christ child gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And, of course, in Roman Catholic celebrations – either in the Mass or at a Benediction, to name two such events – incense was often used. Today, in Mexican and Mexican-American curio shops, one can find

the traditional incense that is burned as well as various aerosol varieties.

Michael Quintanilla, in the *San Antonio Express-News*, catalogued a good many offerings in one typical urban Mexican-American *botica* or drugstore:

"Each vial has a purpose and no two are alike. The various vials claim to bring the wearer good luck, more money, success or movie-star good looks in addition to Cupid's arrow. They can also work to ward off the jealousy and envy of others or those who want to see the wearer fail in life, marriage or business."

Perfumes and oils, too, are popular. Quintanilla quotes the owner of the store: "For wealth, he says, a dab or two of *Exito* (Success) will have the wearer rolling in dough . . . And, if all else fails, *Una Gota de Suerte* (One Drop of Luck) is bound to be the definitive fire water to solving your agony, ridding your hex, curing your illness or getting back at someone. Like an all-purpose cleaner, *Una Gota* will clean up the mess in your life."

An Austin free-lance writer, now living in New York, says that she went on assignment to a place in Houston known to sell the items used in curanderismo. She jokingly told the woman behind the counter that she needed something to change her life. The woman returned with something called Special Brown Oil.

"It smelled like the kind of disinfectant they use in public rest rooms," the writer laughed, but she dutifully dabbed it on as she'd been directed. "The next week," the writer said, "I had a call from a publishing company. They wanted to publish my doctoral dissertation, which I'd done more than ten years earlier. Then an old boyfriend called — my high school sweetheart." The writer is now engaged to marry him. "Trouble is," she says, only half joking, "I'm almost out of the oil!"

Questions about the sort of luck the future will

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bring are common. Trotter and Chavira report that every curandero to whom they spoke had knowledge of card-readers or *señoras*, who have a particular specialty. These use either the tarot, the fifty-two card American deck, or the forty card Mexican deck. "These *señoras* make specific predictions," the authors say, "normally in three areas: health, home life, and social condition (including legal and business matters).

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Mexican-American folk medicine is that its believers rely upon, transfer to, or blame, to a remarkable degree, objects and causes that are external. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the use of what are called Trouble Dolls — recently quite popular.

These small figures reside in a gaily decorated box. At night, the troubled person removes a number of dolls — one to represent each of his problems. The dolls are then placed back inside the box. In the morning, the dolls will have assumed all of the person's woes! This is said to work very well with children.

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Don Pedrito Jaramillo

When author James Michener was researching his book on Texas, one of the first things he did was visit the burial site of Don Pedrito Jaramillo. Most historians would agree that Don Pedrito is the most famous curandero of all time. In fact, some seventy five years after Don Pedrito's death, *Texas Monthly* magazine called him "one of the most powerful men in South Texas."

The *Texas Monthly* article (January 1982) was entitled "The Saint of Falfurrias," and indeed, that's what Don Pedrito has become: a folk saint – a personage to whom people pray in order to combat their illness, change their luck, their habits, or as an expression of their faith.

In 1964, Octavio Romano, a doctoral candidate in Anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley did his dissertation on the phenomenon. It was entitled "Don Pedrito Jaramillo: The Emergence of a Mexican-American Folk-Saint." A folk saint, as Romano defines it, is "a deceased person who is considered a saint by the people but not by the Catholic Church." This, he says, is "relatively rare."

A visitor to the shrine of Don Pedrito might be disappointed to find it is a simple, tin-roofed shed. Inside, however, are a myriad of candles lit in gratitude or in petition. There are crutches affixed to the wall and tucked beneath the beams of the ceiling. And everywhere there are drawings – handmade thank you cards – and other items left behind to link the believer with the healer. Drivers' licenses, because they carry the believer's photograph, are thought to be especially potent when asking Don Pedrito for help. In truth, very little of the original wall space at the Falfurrias shrine can be seen because of these items.

And, of course, almost at any hour of the day, someone will be there, kneeling in prayer.

The land upon which the shrine is built was known, in Don Pedrito's lifetime, as Los Olmos – The Elms. There were occasions when the surrounding countryside was thronged with those seeking the healer's aid. In addition, each mail brought hundreds of petitions from those unable to make the trip in person. At one point, postal authorities suspected Don Pedrito of some sort of fraud, because the outgoing replies were far in excess of the number expected, using the stamps sold at the small rural post office as a guide. The postal investigators were appeased when they learned that most of the people who wrote enclosed stamps to insure a reply.

The definitive biographical details come from Ruth Dodson, who collected lore about Don Pedrito over a great many years and who published it, first in Spanish and later, as *The Healer of Los Olmos*, in English, under the sponsorship of Southern Methodist University and the Texas Folklore Society. What follows is a condensed version of Pedro Jaramillo's life and miracles.

Don Pedrito's given name was Pedro Jaramillo and this is what his tombstone reads. Pedrito is a diminutive of Pedro, and Don is a title of respect. Interestingly, curanderos often refer to their ability to heal as a *don*, which means 'gift' in Spanish.

Don Pedrito was born in 1829 in Mexico. Nothing is known of his childhood, but he was either a shepherd or a laborer; in any case, he was poor.

Don Pedrito is said to have asked God to heal his mother, pledging that, if his mother were not healed, he would leave Mexico. Thus, when his mother died, Don Pedrito crossed the border into Texas.

This was 1881, which would make him 52 years old when he came to Falfurrias. Another item of note is

that Don Pedrito is said to have known the area, having once come that way to deliver alcoholic beverages to one of the ranches.

Don Pedrito is said to have learned of his healing gift when he suffered a fall from a horse (even later in his life, he was said to have been, at best, a mediocre horseman). In the fall, he injured his nose. The pain, in the days that followed, was excruciating. Then something led him to a nearby wallow where he, for no reason he could name, dabbed mud all over the injured spot. This assuaged the pain and he was able to sleep. During that sleep, Don Pedrito said that God spoke to him, telling him to spend the rest of his life healing the sick and injured. From that day forward, this is what Don Pedrito did.

Many of his cures, like the one that he applied to himself, involved bathing. Mud – earth and water – did not cost his patients a cent. Other of his cures involved simple ritual: drinking a glass of water, for instance, for a prescribed number of days – usually three or nine, the so-called mystical numbers.

It is said that, in addition to his ability to heal, Don Pedrito had psychic powers. Many of the legends about him note his uncanny ability to detect the unbelievers. Still other of the stories demonstrate that he could "read minds." On more than one occasion, particularly when someone who had suffered a *susto* came to him, he was able to pinpoint the traumatic event the person had undergone.

Some of the tales reveal Don Pedrito's sense of humor. One involves a woman with migraine headaches who sent a surrogate to seek a cure. The remedy that Don Pedrito prescribed was this: that the woman cut her head off and feed it to the hogs. The woman was so angry when the substitute she'd sent came home and told her this that she sputtered and fumed – and never suffered another headache as long as she lived!

There are patients of Don Pedrito's who were reluctant to tell of the cures he'd prescribed. There are others who reported that he asked his patients to do what seemed bizarre: one woman was to dip her head in a bucket of water before retiring, and then, in the morning, put half a can of tomatoes into each shoe! Indeed, there are even cures requiring that his patients consume large amounts of alcohol!

The thread common to all — and perhaps it is most visible in those cures that seem especially odd — is that the faith of the supplicant was thus tested. Some experts feel, then, that the very belief played a large role in the healing.

Surely this is true even in formal medicine. But what would those experts conclude in some of the cases involving animals? For instance, Dodson reports this cure:

"A man had a very fine horse that got sick. Don Pedrito told the man to tie the horse to a chinaberry tree at twelve o'clock sharp, and at one o'clock sharp to take him away from the tree. With this the horse would get well and the chinaberry tree would die."

This is said to have worked!

One story that I especially like is about a man who drank water so quickly he had failed to notice a grassburr in it. This, he swallowed, and it stuck on the way down. A medical doctor told him only an operation could remove it, and so the man continued to suffer until he went to Don Pedrito. Don Pedrito's remedy was, as were all the things that he prescribed, utterly simple: the man should drink all the saltwater that he could. The man did so, became nauseated, and vomited up the burr, which — the story says — had by this time sprouted two little leaves.

Although many of these stories seem written to

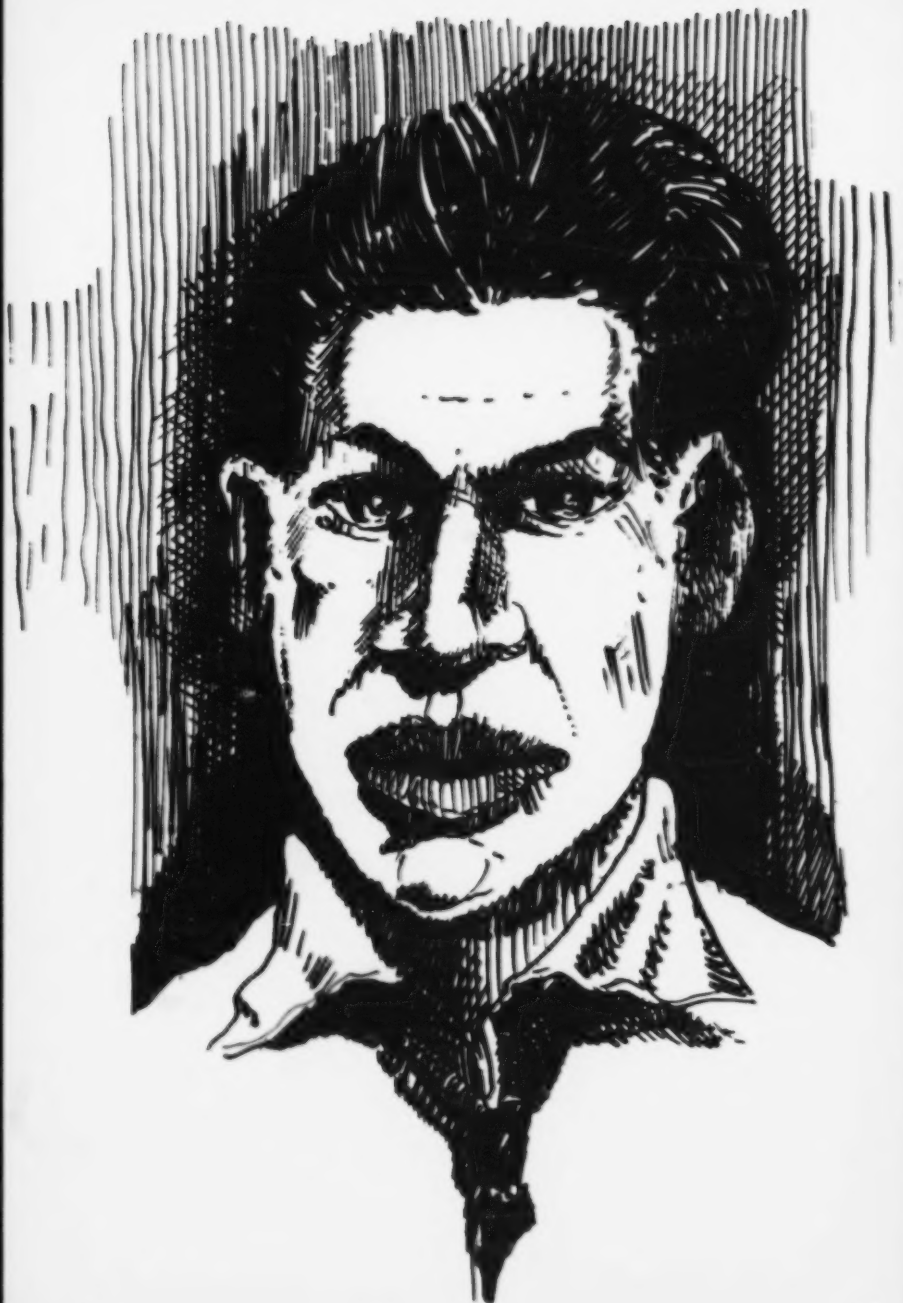
amuse us, they are documented and presumably true accounts.

Don Pedrito, like other curanderos, did not take money for his services. What he did accept, he used to feed the pilgrims who came to Los Olmos, and to finance his travels to heal those who could not make the trip.

During a drought which struck South Texas in 1893 and which lasted for many years, Don Pedrito is said to have fed enormous numbers of people. When the state of Texas sent food, Don Pedrito was selected to distribute it.

Rumor holds that someone he cured gave Don Pedrito his own son in gratitude. This has never been substantiated, but Don Pedrito, who never married and who never sired a son of his own, did adopt Severiano Barrera, who is now considered his descendant.

Don Pedrito died in 1907. His tombstone calls him "The Benefactor of Humanity," which, indeed, he was. He had asked that his grave be opened after three days, but, inexplicably, this was not done.



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Niño Fidencio

Niño Fidencio's healing powers might not have come to the attention of all of Mexico had he not cured the daughter of Plutarco Elias Calles, then the president of that country. From that time forth, El Niño's fame – though he never ventured out of the small and dusty town of Espinazo – was assured.

Niño Fidencio had been born in Guanajuato. He came to Espinazo in 1925 at the bidding of a friend. It is said he was a sort of tutor, but, in legend, anyway, he had been performing cures since the age of eight!

El Niño was born in 1898. He was forty when he died in 1938. Nonetheless, stories persist that he was thirty-three at his death – one of many conscious efforts to link Fidencio's life with the life of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

El Niño had, for example, twelve disciples. He would often go to a nearby mountain to meditate – something that compares, some say, to Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. In any case, this sort of parallel is very often drawn.

Niño Fidencio is remembered as a childlike, happy man. Indeed, for the hoards of sick and injured who came to him, he often prescribed laughter, food, and merriment. When anyone gave him gifts – and the President of Mexico seemed to with great frequency – El Niño used the occasion to share, thus lightening the otherwise gloomy existence of many of the pilgrims. There are stories that say that El Niño Fidencio hired musicians so that everyone – even arthritics and cripples – might dance. The same stories swear that everyone did just that!

Just as with Don Pedrito Jaramillo, there are humorous accounts of some of El Niño's cures. For in-

stance, he is said to have cured a mute by making him stand in front of a swing. El Niño rocked in the swing and bumped into the man often enough to make him angry. The man, furious, found the voice that had eluded him for several years. Similarly, El Niño is said to have tricked a paralytic into standing by tossing sweets just out of her range had she continued to sit.

But there are other cures, too — cures sufficient to inspire some 30,000 or more to trek to Espinazo twice a year (in March and in October, the anniversaries of his birth and death) to pay homage to the famous curandero. And those who come do so from all over the United States and Mexico. Some come year after year. Usually they are those who come in gratitude for a miraculous response to their prayers.

There is something special, however, — something quite particular — about the way El Niño, as opposed to other curanderos, is praised, beseeched, or honored.

Those who are his followers — the *Fidencistas* who dress in white shirts and red kerchiefs — are said to assume his very spirit. They are called "boxes" or *cajones* and are thought, for the duration of their trance, actually to become El Niño.

Indeed, this has been observed by sociologists, who often make the pilgrimage as well. It is said that the most striking difference in those assuming El Niño's spirit is a softening — for El Niño is said to have been very gentle, very benign. The number of *Fidencistas* continues to grow, and there are shrines to Niño Fidencio, as mentioned in the introduction to this book, even in Northern cities throughout the United States.

Not everyone who goes to Espinazo is a *Fidencista*, capable of this psychic feat. Most are simple folk whom El Niño has cured, or those who are hoping for a cure. In Espinazo, proofs of some of Niño Fidencio's cures abound, too:

At his tomb, for instance, there are tumors he is said to have removed on display in formaldehyde-filled jars.

The people who wish to petition him arrive by car, on foot, or by rail to throng the narrow, unpaved streets. The first thing that they do, however, is circle the Pirul tree at the base of the hill three times. It is this tree under which El Niño often sat. The tree has been named *El Pirulito* and it has even been assigned its own caretaker!

Next, the people walk uphill to El Niño's burial site.

The road they walk is *El Camino de Penitencia* or The Road of Penance, and many of them interpret that literally, crawling, or walking on their knees the whole way.

Some locales choose to honor El Niño by sending, not just a few folk, but a *misión*, a contingent of followers often costumed and bearing musical instruments. These go uphill in a more festive fashion than do those seeking to atone. Other groups, however, mirror the crucifixion of Christ, carrying long wooden crosses up the steep and dusty road.

Many choose to climb into a muddy trough at the top of the hill. It is here, at *El Charquito*, that El Niño is said to have bathed lepers.

Elsewhere throughout the town is a carnival-like atmosphere. There are stalls with all sorts of native food as well as remembrances of the pilgrimage and El Niño for sale. There are medals bearing his image alongside those of established saints who are recognized by the Catholic Church. It is this that leads many to call El Niño, as they call Don Pedrito, a "folk saint.' One very unusual religious image that appears rather often is Niño Fidencio's face superimposed upon the face of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

To be sure, Niño Fidencio is the most revered faith

healer in the history of Mexico. He is often called "the curandero of curanderos." His believers paint a striking visual image of the man, who walked barefoot, wore a white tunic, and is said to have cured madmen as well as those with more conventional ills.

His death is shrouded in rumor and mystery. Some say his throat was slit while he was in a trance; others, that he died of exhaustion. The latter makes some sense as El Niño is said to have slept but three hours each night, so busy was he healing those in need. He also fasted regularly. When he did eat, he preferred fruits and vegetables to meat.

But biographical details of El Niño's life are not easy to come by. Most have been changed a bit, to enhance the legend. Citing the age of his death as 33, for instance, is but one example.

But on one point all of the stories agree: that Niño Fidencio tirelessly dedicated himself to others.

Teresita

The life of Teresa Urrea, as documented by William Curry Holden, who researched the subject for some twenty years, reads like a movie script. Hers can be presented here more fully than the lives of the other curanderos precisely because of Holden's fine research.

Teresita was born in Mexico in 1873, the illegitimate daughter of a fourteen year old Indian peasant girl and a dashing but philandering member of the aristocracy. She lived for a while in a dirt-floored village hut, but evidently hankered after something more. Legend says she confronted her father demanding her rightful place, but she, herself, in an interview, said that her father sent for her when she was sixteen years old.

Her father, Don Tomás Urrea, on this and other occasions, was evidently impressed by the girl's spirit. She did indeed go to live with him at Casa Grande. He acknowledged her as his daughter forevermore.

The family lived on an enormous ranch at Cabora, and Teresita quickly apprenticed herself in an informal way to Huila, the woman who distributed herbs and mended bones. Soon the old curandera realized that Teresita had powers that exceeded her own.

Hypnosis appeared to be one. On two occasions, Teresita, assisting Huila, was able to calm patients and, indeed, relieve them of their pain with her eyes alone. Huila is said to have reported her charge's gift to Don Tomás.

Prophecy was another of Teresita's powers. The first reported episode occurred when she was riding with a friend, Apolonaria. The two girls – then about sixteen years old – passed a dashing young stranger. Teresita startled Apolonaria by saying she had just met her

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future husband. What is more, she predicted Apolonaria's wedding day, more than two years hence!

A man who became enamored of Teresita attempted to rape her after she rebuffed him. Teresita was traumatized by the attack and began to have seizures. One resulted in a coma and, indeed, it seemed that Teresita had withdrawn into death.

She was dressed for burial, and her hands were bound across her breasts. Candles were lit. A coffin was built. The mourners gathered.

But suddenly Teresita sat upright, puzzled by the funeral preparations.

Three days later, however, Huila died. She was buried in the coffin that had been built for her beloved Teresita.

Teresita, from that day forth, assumed Huila's role as healer. In addition to preparing herbs and setting bones, however, she added her own aforementioned psychic feats.

Teresita's reputation grew, and soon La Casa Grande was overrun with those seeking her aid. Some of the occasions which were documented are dramatic indeed.

One man, carrying his paralyzed wife, was astounded to hear his name. "Fortunato Avendano, bring your wife to me," the voice called. Then it demanded that a way be cleared for the man. It was Teresita's voice, of course, and she claimed to have known the pair would come.

After Teresita enabled Mariana, the wife, to walk – most say through a combination of hypnosis and massage – the couple pledged undying devotion. Indeed, they remained from that day forward in Teresita's employ.

But the hoards of people tramping through Cabora, most of whom needed to be fed, enraged Don Tomás. He is said, after one particularly weighty confrontation with his daughter, to have come into her bedroom with a gun. He found he could not shoot, and from then on, he did not argue.

Instead, he built separate quarters for his daughter, so that she could hold audiences with her followers without disturbing him or his holdings.

Not too long afterward, a reporter went to Cabora. His description of Teresita was: "Loveliness rather than beauty. What she has transcends beauty. It is something that projects. Projects and disarms ... A warmth, a glow, eagerness and sincerity, a magnetism. Eyes that inspire confidence and faith, that probe and hypnotize. An arresting and remarkable woman. With the unconscious talent of a great actress, she establishes a spell-binding rapport with her audience. It is clear why believers find her irresistible. She tells them to walk and they walk. But for all her saintliness and good works, she is still a woman ..."

The reporter was soon to witness the first of many incidents that would lead him to believe with the others in Teresita's powers.

Meanwhile, under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, Mexico, as Holden puts it, "became the safest place on earth for everyone except the unfortunate Mexicans and Indians."

Díaz made an agreement with the Roman Catholic Church in exchange for its support wherein he would not confiscate church property to reward his men. This meant the communal holdings of the Indians would be taken instead.

Teresita was a favorite among the Yaquis, who saw her as an oracle and who came to Cabora in great numbers. The Yaquis told her about Díaz' policy of con-

fiscating their lands and asked for her advice. She told them, as she was later to tell the Mayo (not Mayan, who are a wholly different tribe) Indians who sought her counsel, to be patient and tolerant.

The *Mestizos* who inhabited Tomochic became devoted to her, too. In fact their leader, Cruz Chávez, began a lengthy correspondence with Teresita. But Chávez' devotion to Teresita went too far. Images of Teresita, for instance, were placed within the Tomochic church and the people prayed to these. Indeed, Chávez wrote an entire liturgy to accomodate the "living saint."

This was enough to enflame a Catholic priest, Father Manuel Gustelúm, to speak out against her from the Tomochic pulpit. The priest was stunned to hear himself contradicted immediately following his denounciation by none other than Cruz Chávez. The priest immediately reported the people of Tomochic to the government, saying they were in a state of rebellion.

This same priest had once crudely ordered that Teresita in her trance state be tested. What he'd done was approach two nuns, extracting a hatpin from the headpiece of one, and asking that she use it to pierce the flesh of Teresita's leg. If she were indeed in a trance, the priest reasoned, she would not be injured, and, if not, it would be better that the fraud be exposed. Under orders, the nuns went to Teresita's bedside and did what the priest had described. The pin went in one side of Teresita's calf and out the other without bleeding and, evidently, without inflicting pain since Teresita didn't stir from her trance state.

When she finally awakened of her own accord, she plucked the pin from her leg as if it were a minor irritant and told them to take it back to their priest.

It was this priest, then, who now had denounced the villagers who so idolized "La Santa de Cabora," their living saint.

Meanwhile, two other events had taken place. One occurred when the governor of the state of Chihuahua sent an envoy to remove two paintings – probably by Murillo – from the little village and hang, in their stead, two mediocre paintings. The men of Tomochic, led by Cruz Chávez, stopped the envoy and delivered a message to the governor on honesty.

This did not predispose the governor to ignore Father Gustelúm's claim now.

Simultaneously with Gustelúm's complaint came word that a caravan of expensive merchandise had gone around Tomochic for reasons of safety.

When President Porfirio Díaz heard all of this, he was quick to conclude that the men of Tomochic were indeed in revolt. He sent troops.

Cruz Chávez and his men heard this and went to Cabora to consult Teresita. When Díaz learned this, he ordered Chávez and his men apprehended, and Teresita placed under surveillance.

Government troops, led by a Captain Enrique, stormed Cabora. But Enrique was a friend of Don Tomás. The two men spoke, and Enrique told Don Tomás he had orders to arrest Teresita. Don Tomás and his sons swore they'd give their lives in her defense. Enrique said he would withdraw his men while Don Tomás thought this over, and did so, giving Don Tomás and his daughter a chance to escape.

They rode to a government enclave and gave themselves up to a general whom, Don Tomás felt, would proffer justice.

Meanwhile, at Cabora, Enrique went in search of the approaching Cruz Chávez band, only to be slaughtered by them.

The general to whom Don Tomás and Teresita had

turned themselves in ushered them back to Cabora, but, learning of Enrique's death, amassed several hundred men to quash Cruz Chávez.

Meanwhile, more events occurred to convince Díaz that Teresita was behind a movement toward revolution. Mayo Indians, for example, attacked a place Navojoa convinced that "La Santa de Cabora" would protect them. These attacks included chants to the living saint. When Mayos began converging on Cabora, the government became convinced that Teresita – who was then but nineteen years old! – was directing the revolt.

In fact, there is some humor in the scene. A contingent of five hundred soldiers got to Cabora before the rumored influx of Mayos. Five hundred armed men confronting a nineteen year old girl!

But Díaz was not amused. He called Teresita a dangerous agitator and ordered her exiled. Thus she and her father were transported, under guard, to Nogales, Arizona.

Teresita's beauty was such that the commander in charge of escorting her out of the country left his horse to the keeping of a friend and took the carriage seat beside his charge. He proposed marriage, then, rebuffed, suggested that they have a mere liaison. Teresita told Don Tomás, who threatened the man. This soldier did not complete the journey, but entrusted the transport to his next in command!

Arizona welcomed Teresita and she began curing a hundred patients a day.

Meanwhile, the Mexican government decided it had lost control of her movements by sending her out of the country. They wanted Teresita back.

After two kidnap attempts were made, Don Tomás moved with Teresita away from the Mexican border and into the interior of Arizona.

In Mexico, Cruz Chávez was still honoring Teresita, and, indeed, was fighting the federal soldiers under a banner made by the Tomochic women bearing the legend "La Santa de Cabora." The government brutally slaughtered Cruz Chávez and every male over the age of thirteen at Tomochic. President Díaz blamed the need for this hideous government action on Teresita.

In Arizona, a pro-revolution newspaper editor who had been exiled with Teresita and her father tried unsuccessfully to have Teresita endorse his cause. He decided to link her to his movement anyway, thus further convincing Díaz of her guilt. What he did was print a photograph of Teresita with her name and the words *La Espíritu de Tomochic* beneath it.

Her enemies needed little more, but more was to follow nonetheless. Though Teresita moved to El Paso and was healing 200 patients a day, bands of revolutionaries continued to attack the government of Mexico in her name. In one organized attack from New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas, the rebels called themselves *Teresistas*. And most who were killed were found to be wearing the photograph captioned without her knowledge over their hearts.

Attempts were made on Teresita's life, either by agents of the government of Mexico or the fanatic followers of Father Gustelúm. Don Tomás had her moved to Clifton, Arizona.

This was, evidently, an idyllic time. Visitors came from as far away as Mexico City and New York City. Patients, however, were few. Thus Teresita resumed her old gaiety, playing the marimbas and guitar, and singing.

In 1899, at the age of twenty-seven, she fell in love.

An odd version of the shotgun wedding ensued. Don Tomás refused Guadalupe Rodriguez Teresita's hand, and Lupe, as he was called, hoisted a carbine and demanded it! Teresita went to Lupe's side and did marry

him, though the marriage was never consumated. The couple spent the entire night at a party, and the following day, Lupe told Teresita to follow him, though he stayed far ahead. She did follow, and he turned, pulled a gun, and tried to shoot her – something she had, years earlier, predicted.

Lupe was jailed and judged insane, though later it was suspected that he was in the employ of Díaz, hired either to lure Teresita back to Mexico or prove that she was dead.

Meanwhile, so much of a rift had occured between Don Tomás and Teresita over her marriage that she thought it best to leave. She went to California, ostensibly to cure the child of a relative. She was never to see her father again.

In San Francisco, Teresita's cures amazed the populace and brought her large-scale publicity. In the wake of this, a medical company signed her to a contract and sent her on tour. In St. Louis, she found her lack of English handicapped her, and sent a plea for assistance to a friend back home.

The friend's bilingual son, John Van Order, then nineteen, joined Teresita in St. Louis to act as interpreter. Soon word came to Arizona that the pair were "married" – impossible since, legally, Teresita was the wife of Lupe. Interestingly, when descendants or others who had known Teresita were asked about her sainthood, they always disputed it, claiming she had been married. As author Holden points out, virginity was not demanded of male saints!

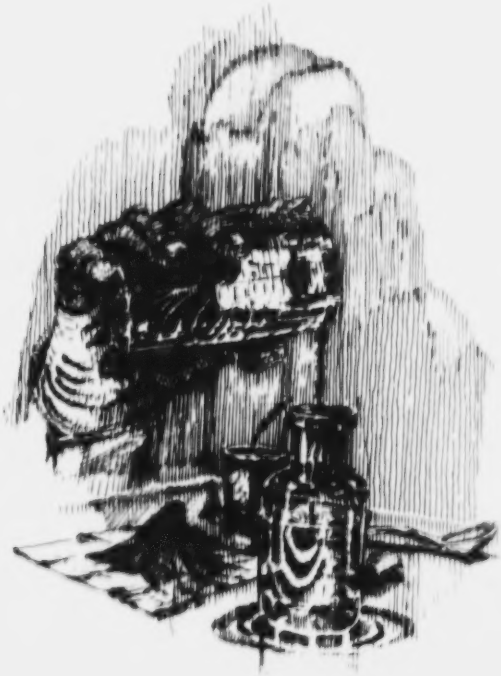
In any case, during this period, Teresita and John even lived in an apartment in New York City (110 East 28th Street). In 1902, their daughter, Laura, was born. That same year, Teresita learned of the death of Don Tomás.

Though John and Teresita seemed less close with

each passing day. In 1904, they had another child, a girl again. Christened Magdalena, the child was born in Clifton, Arizona, where Teresita, no longer touring for the medical company, had returned.

She seemed reduced, diminished. Her healing powers no longer seemed spectacular, and she, herself, was weak. She developed "lung trouble," and even had to stop seeing patients because of its contagion.

Before she died, she sought out her long lost mother, Cayetana, the Indian peasant who had bourn her at the age of fourteen. This reunion occurred just days before Teresita's death in 1906. She was buried in Clifton next to Don Tomás.



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Modern Curanderos

This book has emphasized the rituals of curanderismo and the folk ailments they can cure. It should not be forgotten, however, that this is a distorted emphasis. Curanderos can, and usually do, treat organic ailments such as migraine, flu, even cancer. In fact, many of the folk ailments mentioned here can be treated by a family member. It is common to call in a curandero if the ailment persists or if it is a particularly severe case.

It is by virtue of this that an *El Proyecto Comprender* script, is able to refer to the practice of curanderismo as "an optional health care system." The description of the curandero, as it appears there, is worth quoting, summarizing, as it does, the reasons for the marked efficacy of curanderismo:

"The strength of the curandero's success lies in the establishment of a personal relationship with his patient. He shares with his patient the same culture, language, and many of the same health beliefs and practices. Many Mexican-American families have a long-standing relation with one particular curandero, much the same as they might have with a family physician. A curandero may be compared to a small town physician: he serves a relatively small number of patients, he knows the families intimately, and therefore is well-prepared to treat his patient's physical, psychological, and spiritual needs."

And, as Prof. Robert Trotter from Pan American University pointed out in an interview with the *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, the modern curandero is not by any means uncivilized or barbaric. "People try to make curanderos different," Trotter said. "They equate them with what can be found in New Guinea. But curanderos are a part of an urban, industrialized society. They watch television, they know about Anacin and Bufferin and the modern health care system. They're not primitive."

Still, even a factual and pro-curanderismo article, quoted out of context, can make the practices sound very peculiar indeed. The following is from Jennifer Bolch, writing in the *Dallas Times Herald*:

"... without a thought for the professors and physicians who write them off as superstitious, these simple, humble men and women go right on lighting candles, saying prayers, sweeping people with eggs and incense and lemons, anointing them with specially prepared oils and waters, brewing up herb teas, invoking spirits. Healing. Healing bodies, minds and spirits, tummy aches and terrors."

In capsule form, the practice of curanderismo cannot be adequately portrayed.

Prof. Robert Trotter is wise to enjoin us not to forget that the contemporary curandero is no stranger to the so-called miracle drugs and methods of modern science. "In Mexico," Trotter says, "curanderos prescribe antibiotics as well as *te de manzanilla* (chamomile tea) because such medicine is sold across the counter there without a necessary doctor's prescription. Here in the United States, the curanderos are restricted with what they can tell the patient to take. They know the value of penicillin, so they also know when it's time to refer their patients to a medical doctor."

Methods differ; time alters some practices (for example, aerosol sprays are sometimes substituted for incense). On the other hand, consider the striking similarity between Teresita's mode of healing as she explained it in a 1900 *San Francisco Examiner* interview with Helen Dare, and that of a modern curandero or, for that matter, a contemporary holistic practitioner:

" 'When I cure with my hands I do like this,' and she took my hands in hers — hands of singular slenderness and fineness, cool, smooth, supple, firm, delicately made, charming to the touch — and placed her thumbs against mine, holding with a close nervous grasp.

'Sometimes,' she said, 'I rub, sometimes I give also medicines or lotions that I make from herbs I gather. I pray, too, not with the lips, but I lift up my spirit to God for help to do His will on earth.' "

That Teresita's method would be soothing cannot be denied. One can almost feel her touch, hear her voice, as one reads! Conversely, Don Pedrito would give prescriptions or *recetas* – a method much more similar to contemporary medical practice. One such – and it can be considered typical – was:

"Don Feliciano, in the name of God, your wife and your mother should each take a cup of cold water for seven nights at bedtime."

Most of Don Pedrito's cures were transmitted this way, perhaps because so many of his clients approached him through messengers or by using the mail.

Is curanderismo legal? In Mexico, of course, there is no problem, and this is why in border towns, where patients can cross the border at will, curanderismo is so strong. Even a famous healer like Don Pedrito, however, had difficulties with the law. This occurred in San Antonio, where Don Pedrito drew quite a crowd and therefore the attention of police. When they found he charged nothing for his services, they stopped harassing him.

Most curanderos can work openly and freely today. An article in the *San Antonio Light* explained, "In Texas, curanderos operate with the tacit approval of the Catholic Church, whose religious symbolism the healers often appropriate, and of the State Board of Medical Examiners. (The board focuses on licensing doctors and investigating complaints against individual MDs and other providers of health care. So far, no complaints have been filed against curanderos.)" This observation by reporters Patrick Boulay and Allan Turner was made in 1981.

Just as Teresita and Don Pedrito – both curing

during roughly the same time period – were markedly different, so are curanderos today. A recent television presentation by KPRC-TV News in Houston made this very clear. Maria, for example, a young curandera mentioned earlier in this book, wore no special garb. She used, if you remember, plants to absorb the patient's negative forces. And, contradicting what is usually the case, Maria charged a set fee. Her male counterpart on the television program, however, was a man perhaps in his sixties. He wore satin robes and a peaked satin cap of the sort one might associate with wizardry. He used a sword, too, and threatened the evil from the body of the woman who had come to him as a patient.

Not surprisingly, the patient with whom he was shown was an older woman. Again, not surprisingly, many of Maria's patients were young professionals, and a number were *Anglo* – that is, not Mexican-Americans.

There are even *Anglo* healers who have been awarded the title of curandera. Jewel Babb is one particularly well known, in part because of the publicity generated by Pat Ellis Taylor's book, *Border Healing Woman*.

Jewel Babb's story is not unlike that of many other folk healers: It wasn't, for example, until relatively late in her life that Jewel Babb discovered she had the ability to heal. Once she did, she set about doing it full time. She lives in what we would call poverty, charging nothing for her services. For the most part, she uses a combination of baths and massage. She sometimes talks about "healing with the mind," which Taylor says Mrs. Babb "visualizes as radiating from the palms of her hands when she raises them in the air, pointed in the direction of the patient."

There are many – even Mexicans and Mexican-Americans – who refer to Jewel Babb as a curandera. She, Taylor says, "satisfies the more specific expectations of her Mexican clientele, while at the same time providing a model for folk healing to which the Anglo counterculture can relate." In fact, Taylor sees Jewel Babb

as "a true representative of a border culture which has provided a climate for bringing traditions together." Perhaps this is so because Jewel Babb's is, as Taylor so aptly summarizes, "a healing method which will treat the whole person."

This is the important thing to keep in mind about curanderismo. It does not isolate, as modern science tends to; rather, it embraces. And, like an embrace, it shelters and it warms.

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Further Reading

There isn't a great deal of material available about curanderismo, and some of it may be difficult to find. I've made a list of some of the books that have appealed to me as well as those I've quoted at various places in this text. Most are nonfiction, but there are a few novels which have scenes or plots involving curanderismo and which ought to be mentioned. One such is ***Caldo Largo*** by Earl Thompson (Signet New American Library, 1976). This well-written, hard-hitting adventure story is set in the ports of South Texas and Mexico. It is still in print in paperback. Another, though lesser known novel is ***Bless Me, Ultima*** by Rudolfo A. Anaya, winner of the Second Annual *Premio Quinto Sol* National Chicano literary award. It is available in paper from Tonatiuh International Inc., 2150 Shattuck Avenue, Berkeley, California 94704.

You might also wish to consult my first book, ***Green Medicine: Traditional Mexican-American Herbal Remedies***. It is an easy-to-read list of nearly a hundred of the most commonly used medicinal herbs. It is available from Nieves Press, Box 2205, Kingsville, TX 78363.

Others, in no particular order, are:

Cooking and Curing With Mexican Herbs by Dolores L. Latorre (Encino Press, 1977): This text, based on research done in Mexico, mentions quite a few folk ills that are ignored elsewhere. It is also an excellent and handsomely put together cookbook.

Curanderismo: Mexican-American Folk Psychiatry by Ari Kiev (The Free Press, 1968): Kiev examines curanderismo from the point of view of a psychiatrist. In fact, he relates many of the folk illnesses to psychiatric disorders. He is very good at analyzing the way curanderismo works and why.

Curanderismo by Robert T. Trotter and Juan Antonio Chavira (University of Georgia Press, 1981). This book was done as part of a grant given to acquaint health care professionals in regions with a high Mexican-American population with practices of curanderismo. It shows the way the traditional folk methods complement their formal counterparts. Its descriptions of the rituals are particularly good.

Stories That Must Not Die by Juan Sauvageau (Oasis Press, 1975-6): These four volumes recount stories and legends collected by Sauvageau and his students from the South Texas and Rio Grande Valley areas. They are presented in both English and Spanish, side by side, and each tale is followed by questions to aid discussion. In this way, they are effective classroom books as well as just plain interesting reading.

Discovering Folklore Through Community Resources, edited by Magdalena Benavides Sumpter was published in 1978 by the Development and Assessment Center for Bilingual Education in Austin, Texas. It is an elementary school text put together "in order to rediscover and preserve a part of the culture of the Mexican-American as it relates to folkloric tradition. It is extremely simplified, of course, and valuable particularly to the parent who wishes to introduce his children to curanderismo and its practices.

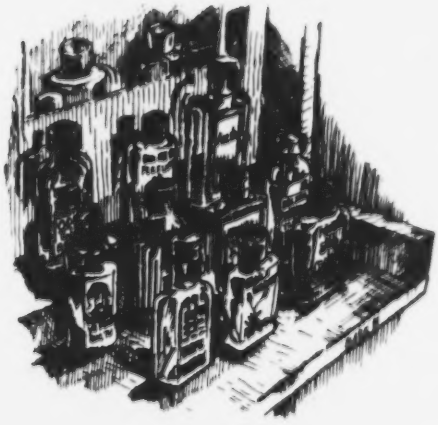
The Healer of Los Olmos and Other Mexican Lore, edited by Wilson M. Hudson (Southern Methodist University Press, 1975). This is one of the marvelous books published by the Texas Folklore Society. The section which deals with Don Pedrito Jaramillo is the most famous and it was compiled by Ruth Dodson, who "decided to collect and write down the stories the people told about this man." It is a valuable resource and even contains photographs of Don Pedrito.

Teresita by William Curry Holden (Stemmer House, 1978): In novelistic fashion, Holden pieces together and makes intensely dramatic the story of Teresa Urrea, a

Mexican curandera and psychic. Holden researched this subject for more than 20 years.

Border Healing Woman by Pat Ellis Taylor (University of Texas Press, 1981). A very feeling collection of interviews with Jewel Babb, an Anglo healer whom some say has earned the title of curandera. Taylor, whose appreciation of Jewel Babb shines through on every page, is the perfect counterpoint to her subject.

Arigo: Surgeon of the Rusty Knife by John G. Fuller (Crowell, 1974): I mention this book only because it is such a fascinating case, relaying as it does the story of a simple Brazilian peasant who, in a trance state, took on the spirit – and the abilities – of a German doctor and who performed incredible feats of healing. The word *curandero* when used in Brazil, interestingly, is a pejorative term, always, the author says, connoting witchcraft.



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Afterword

It is my hope that this book and its companion volume, *Green Medicine: Traditional Mexican-American Herbal Remedies*, will give you a good and accurate picture of the compelling beliefs and practices of curanderismo. All too often, people outside the Mexican-American culture are unaware of either the proven medical value of many of the practices or the rich historical roots from which they derive.

Furthermore, they know very little about the famous curanderos I have cited here: Don Pedrito, Niño Fidencio, and Teresita, not to mention present-day healers such as Jewel Babb. I have attempted to provide sketches of these remarkable people about whom so little is available.

And in this book, as in *Green Medicine*, I have provided a list of sources for further reading with my own notes about each, should any reader care to delve more deeply into the subject.

For curanderismo is, indeed, a topic worthy of a lifetime of study.

Designed by Carolyn Banks